



**STEPS FOR EVALUATING (AND
CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING)
CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAMS**

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STEPS FOR EVALUATING (AND CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING) CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAMS

OVERVIEW

Developing career pathways is an evaluative process that entails identifying the requirements of success at each level of education and employment in a target industry sector, highlighting barriers to entry and advancement in the target field, and adapting education programs and support services to break down those barriers.

Evaluating career Pathways programs involves continuing this process beyond the start-up phase. This means staying abreast of changes in requirements for advancement at each level of education and employment and tracking how well students in Pathways programs are progressing from one level to the next. The goal throughout this process is to modify programs and services and add new ones to help students advance more readily and rapidly toward careers and further education in the target field.

The following are recommended steps for evaluating and continuously improving career Pathways programs. The first section outlines the basic steps for collecting the data needed to assess the performance of students at each program level and track their outcomes when they leave. The sections following offer guidance on assessing how well a program is working, whether it is effective and how to use the findings from the evaluation process to improve program operation and outcomes over time.

DATA COLLECTION FOR TRACKING PATHWAYS STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES

D1. Secure informed consent to participate in an evaluation from all participants when they begin the program.

“Informed consent” is a process in which the risks, benefits and requirements of a research study are explained to persons invited to take part in a study. Before entering the study (in this case, a program evaluation) a participant should sign an informed consent form, which should contain a description of the goals and methods of the study, the risks involved and the steps that will be taken to protect participants’ confidentiality (a sample is included in Appendix A). Participants can elect whether or not to take part in the study. If they opt out, their information cannot be used. Unless your agency has the legal authority to track the outcomes of your students or clients, securing informed consent is necessary if you want to find out what happens after they leave the program.

D2. Collect data on the demographic characteristics of every student/participant upon enrollment.

Table B1 in Appendix B shows recommended data elements to be collected upon entry to a given program level. Based on the program’s funding requirements and objectives, providers may also want to collect other sorts of information on participants, such as welfare participation and criminal records. Educational institutions and other providers probably already collect the basic set of data as part of their registration and enrollment systems. If so, then they will need to “flag” the records of career Pathways participants so that they can be distinguished from others.

D3. Collect data on the performance and immediate outcomes of every participant.

Table B2 in Appendix B lists a recommended set of data elements. Again, these data are typically already collected by educational institutions and other established service providers.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION (HOW WELL IS THE PROGRAM BEING IMPLEMENTED?)

F1. Collect information about the program as courses are being taught.

Interview participants, instructors and staff around the midpoint and at the end of each initial program cycle to identify what is working with the program, what is not and how it can be improved. Every effort should be made to interview participants who drop out to find out why they are leaving and what can be done to prevent attrition in the future.

F2. Learn about how well the program has served participants after completion.

Regularly interview participants who have completed a particular program level, employers that have hired them, and faculty and support staff at the next level of education about the strengths and weaknesses of the program and ways it can be improved.

F3. Examine the performance of each program over time, benchmarked against its own historical performance (or that of similar pre-existing programs).

Programs at each level should be evaluated in terms of the demographics of program participants and participant retention and completion rates.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION (IS THE PROGRAM EFFECTIVE?)

S1. Document the main components of the programs being evaluated, including program content, duration and support services.

It is important to accurately describe the eligibility criteria for program entry and the process by which participants are recruited and selected. Describe any major changes in the design of each program made during the course of each cycle, interviewing program faculty and staff to better understand the reasons for these changes. (This will make it possible to more accurately compare and contrast outcomes across programs and over time.)

S2. Analyze the full costs of the start-up and operation of programs at each level.

These include the costs of staff, materials and supplies, equipment, and administrative and facilities costs.

S3. Track the further education participation outcomes of leavers (completers and non-completers) from each program level.

This can be accomplished by matching program participant data with data from partner institutions or from state agencies that collect information on individual students or program participants. If the necessary data are not available locally or from the state, the National Student Clearinghouse will for a fee match individuals (using name and date of birth) against its database of students in undergraduate programs across the country.

S4. Using Unemployment Insurance wage records, collect data on employment and earnings of program leavers (completers and non-completers) for at least six quarters prior to and six quarters following program participation.

By law, all employers with employees eligible for unemployment insurance (UI) are required to report to the state the quarterly earnings of every employee employed in that state. States use this information to calculate unemployment insurance benefits. In most states, the employment security agency is responsible for collecting UI wage data. In many states, educational institutions and other human service providers can match data on their participants with wage record data.

S5. Secure data on an appropriate comparison group with which to compare labor market outcomes of Pathways program participants.

Compare the labor market—and, if possible, further education—outcomes of program participants with comparison group members, matched statistically based on demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, education and prior earnings). Hollenbeck and Huang used such a “quasi-experimental” method with Employment Service participants as a comparison group to assess the net impact of several workforce training programs in the Washington State workforce system.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (HOW CAN THE PROGRAM BE IMPROVED?)

CI1. Bring together faculty, staff and partners to study and discuss the data from the formative and summative evaluation activities, diagnose the causes of the problems/barriers that prevent students from progressing and decide on ways to modify programs and services to promote student advancement.

It is essential that those responsible for program delivery be empowered to evaluate program performance and devise ways to improve it. They are best positioned to know what will work in the field, and unless they feel as though they “own” efforts to improve program outcomes, there is little likelihood that any improvements will be adopted on a wide scale.

CI2. Evaluate effectiveness of program modifications in improving outcomes.

Program staff and partners should be asked to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve program performance to ensure that they indeed have the desired results.

CI3. Shift resources (people, money, facilities) to support program and service strategies that prove effective in promoting educational and labor market advancement.

This will help to ensure that innovations that improve program performance are sustained. Because resource allocation decisions are generally made from the top, each partner organization’s leadership should have “bought into” the process of evaluating career pathways from the start and see the benefits of it for strategic planning and budgeting.

¹ See, K.M Hollenbeck and J-M Huang, Net Impact and Benefit-Cost Estimates of the Workforce Development System in Washington State, Upjohn Institute Technical Report No. TR03-018, Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, July 2003. The results of their net impact analysis are summarized in Washington State Education and Training Coordinating Board, Workforce Training Results 2002, Olympia, WA: Author, March 2003.

APPENDIX A SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PERMISSION TO PARTICIPATE IN AN EVALUATION OF THIS TRAINING PROGRAM

The training program you are in is provided by [NAME OF PROVIDER] with funding from [NAME OF FUNDER(S)]. Both [SHORT NAME OF PROVIDER] and the funding agency(ies) would like to see how effective this program is in helping you and other participants get better jobs and pursue further education and training.

We would like to have your permission to access information on your employment, wages and participation in education and training for use in evaluating this training program. This information is available from state agencies such as the [UNEMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT AND HIGHER EDUCATION BOARD]. None of the information we collect on you from these agencies will be shared with anyone else, and no one will ever be able to connect this information with you personally.

You do not have to participate in this evaluation. If you choose not to participate, [NAME OF PROVIDER] cannot use information on you to evaluate the program.

Please read the following statement and then sign and date below if you agree to give [NAME OF PROVIDER] access to information needed to evaluate the program.

I hereby give [NAME OF PROVIDER] permission to use the information I have provided and information collected by state agencies on my employment and further education once I leave this training program. I understand that this information will be used to improve the quality of this program for future students, and that I will not benefit directly. All information about me and my job and education outcomes will be kept strictly confidential and will be used for evaluation purposes only. I understand that I do not have to give this information if I do not want to.

SIGNED:

SIGNATURE

DATE

PRINT FULL NAME

APPENDIX B

TABLE B1

RECOMMENDED DATA ELEMENTS TO COLLECT ON PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS UPON PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

Measure	Data Elements
Personal identifier	▪ Social Security Number
Age	▪ Date of birth
Gender	▪ Male or female
Race/Ethnicity	▪ White, African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Other
Education	▪ Earned high school diploma? (y/n) ▪ Earned GED? (y/n)
Employment	▪ Currently employed? (y/n) - If yes, hours per week currently working
Native language	▪ Native language is English? (y/n)
Education and Career Goals	▪ Main reason for enrolling in program ▪ Main goal for employment in the next 12 months ▪ Main goal for further education or training (beyond this program) in the next three years
Tested basic skills at entry	[This will provide a pre-assessment to be compared with an assessment at program completion for use in measuring learning gains. Each provider can choose the instrument it will use. We recommend testing reading and math skills at a minimum.]

TABLE B2

RECOMMENDED DATA ELEMENTS TO COLLECT ON PATHWAYS PARTICIPANT PERFORMANCE

Measure	Data Elements
Personal identifier	▪ Social Security Number
Start date	▪ Date participant started in program
Course performance (if applicable)	▪ Courses attempted ▪ Courses completed ▪ Course grades
Retention	▪ Participant successfully completed the program (y/n) - If yes, date of completion - If no, reason for leaving the program.
Credentials	▪ Credentials earned